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GORBACHEV: MEASURING THE MAN

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The best-informed State Department experts on Russia and the sharp-eyed Kremlin-watchers in the U.S. intelligence community now have had nearly six months to analyze General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev's performance in office. They have reached a growing consensus on what we can expect from him in the future and, on a background basis, are willing to share their tentative conclusions.

First, there is general agreement that the new leader has moved much faster than expected to seize the commanding heights of Soviet political power. Helped by empty seats in the Politburo waiting to be filled, Mr. Gorbachev has been impressive in his ability to bring about an abrupt generational change in Soviet leadership.

With the Brezhnev gerontocracy ready to fall like overripe fruit, Mr. Gorbachev astutely loaded the dice against it with his campaign for competence, sobriety, and discipline. According to diplomatic reporting, the newly selected leaders have reputations for hard-driving ability and among the Moscow elite they are looked upon with genuine respect.

There is nothing on the record, however, to suggest that the general secretary is any kind of liberal economic reformer who wants to transform the Soviet system of state ownership into an open-market economy. Rather, Kremlin-watchers in Washington are agreed that he is committed to making the state econ-

omy more productive by improved work discipline under younger, more competent, and better-educated managers, who are to be held to strict standards of performance.

So much corruption, alcoholism, and inefficiency have been allowed to accumulate that there is room for Mr. Gorbachev's reforming zeal to make a real difference in the next two or three years. Some U.S. analysts anticipate that, with good harvests, the new regime might achieve a temporary growth rate of as great as 4 percent.

But there is wide agreement that the general secretary will soon have to start lying about the statistics to hide the economic stagnation or face up to the need for a much more radical opening of the system to market forces. On the basis of his Leninist convictions, the best guess is that Mr. Gorbachev will try to muddle through with minor reform, such as an increase in the number of private garden plots and more autonomy for factory managers.

In this event, the Soviet economy will fall farther and farther behind the increasing sophistication of American and Japanese technologies, to the point where a European economist describes it "as drifting downward into a different league."

In the field of foreign policy, Mr. Gorbachev has won a reputation for urbane civility in his diplomatic dealings, but the consensus of U.S. analysts is that he is "an orthodox expansionist," committed to improving the Soviet strategic position on three separate fronts.

In Western Europe, he is trying to split the NATO alliance by playing on European fears of the Strategic Defense Initiative and attempting to win over social democratic parties with a barrage of arms-control proposals.

In Eastern Europe, after Konstantin Chernenko's uncertain rule, Mr. Gorbachev is

reasserting the authority of the Soviet Union as the dominant superpower in the area and cracking down on tendencies toward independence.

In Poland, the decline of the Communist Party and the strength of the underground are seen by Kremlin-watchers as "an unending nightmare" for Mr. Gorbachev, and he has reacted by imposing increased repression, while responding with self-righteous indignation to any questioning of the Soviet record on human rights.

In the Third World, the new general secretary is perceived to be "more aggressive than Mr. Andropov." He not only has continued the brutal war of extermination against the Afghan guerrillas but has extended the bombing into Pakistan to try to cut off their supplies.

In the face of strong opposition in the U.S. Congress, Mr. Gorbachev boldly met with the Nicaraguan president, Daniel Ortega, to promise the Sandinistas additional Soviet assistance. Soviet arms and subsi-

dies on a huge scale continue to keep Fidel Castro in business, while Soviet arms sold to Libya find their way into the hands of Islamic terrorists.

From the Philippines to the Sudan to South Africa, Reagan officials expect an energetic and skillful exploitation of all targets of opportu-

nity by a new Soviet leadership that seems committed to "a deeply antagonistic relationship with the United States."

Under these circumstances, the summit meeting between President Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev in November is more likely to be a sophisticated struggle to score pro-

paganda points rather than a genuine meeting of minds.

Bright as he is, it will take Mr. Gorbachev a long time to accept the fact that he is confronted with a united Western alliance and that he has no choice but to come to terms with it.